

Bearing Witness: Joyce Carol Oates Studies

Volume 3

Article 1

2016

Review of Joyce Carol Oates's *The Man Without a Shadow*

Eric K. Anderson
LonesomeReader Blog

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/jcostudies>



Part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

Citation Information

Anderson, Eric K. (2016) "Review of Joyce Carol Oates's *The Man Without a Shadow*," *Bearing Witness: Joyce Carol Oates Studies*: Vol. 3, Article 1.

DOI: 10.15867/331917.3.1

Available at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/jcostudies/vol3/iss1/1>

For more information, please contact southerr@usfca.edu.

[Creative Commons 4.0](#)



UNIVERSITY OF
SAN FRANCISCO

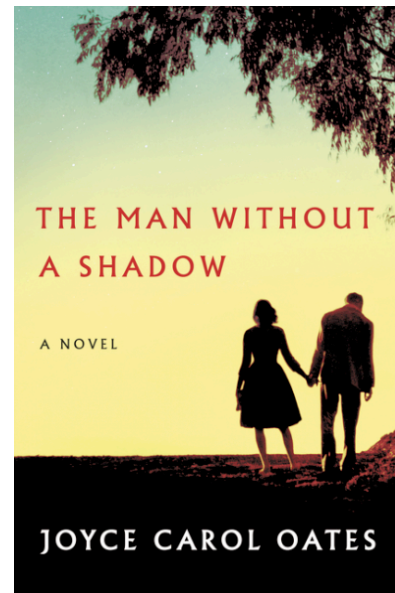
Gleeson Library |
Geschke Center

Review of Joyce Carol Oates's *The Man Without a Shadow*

Eric K. Anderson
LonesomeReader Blog

Strong love stories drive many of the greatest novels of all time, but the love story in *The Man Without a Shadow* is remarkably unusual and haunting. From this tale Joyce Carol Oates raises probing questions about the nature of love and the phenomenon of consciousness. Elihu Hoopes—a charismatic man from a prominent and wealthy family, and an ardent civil rights activist—experiences an acute inflammation of the brain in 1964 which causes him to lose all short-term memory. He is incapable of remembering anything new for more than seventy seconds. His condition can never be cured

because of irreparable damage to the hippocampus area of his brain which is responsible for the formation of new memories. In the following decades he's regularly taken to a university research facility or "Memory Lab" where groups of neuroscientists engage him with tests to better understand the biological connection between the brain and memory. Even though this is for the betterment of society and human knowledge, the question lingers: is Elihu being exploited? Margot Sharpe, one of the scientists, builds an entire career out of working closely with the amnesiac. The connection she forms with him over a lifetime turns into a strikingly original romance.



A recurring image throughout the novel of a drowned young girl haunts Elihu's thoughts and appears obsessively in his drawings, creating an intriguing mystery. The past impinges on his constant present and the story of the girl's fate is gradually revealed. Elihu tried to absolve his past and the country's legacy of racism by engaging in the civil rights movement. The tragedy is that Elihu's condition doesn't allow him to conceptualize possibilities for the future. The opposite is the case for Margot Sharpe who has completely cut herself off from her past by inventing a life as a serious scientist who lives for her work. When her family tries to make urgent contact with her, Margot severs ties with them completely to devote herself to her research and to Elihu, resolving that "She will be true to Elihu Hoopes. Even if no one, including Elihu himself, will know." Her romantic attachment to Elihu grows even though he has no enduring awareness of who she is. Because he can't ever remember her, Margot must continually introduce herself to him and has the opportunity to be whomever she wishes, whether his doctor or his wife. After an extended period of time engaging in this affair which is in a continuous state of renewal, "She has come to the conclusion that most of life is a masquerade, especially sexual life. And what is love but the most powerful of masquerades." Although this is a most unusual love story, it resonates with the ways in which people present versions of themselves to their loved ones, and that even the most devoted relationships can be extinguished in a flash.

The research into Elihu Hoopes's condition begins in the 1960s and, unsurprisingly, the majority of the scientists working in the "Memory Lab" are men. As in many of Oates other novels such as *Mudwoman* (2012), *Blonde* (2000) and *Marya: A Life* (1986), a woman's professional success is often predicated more on her gender than the extent of her abilities, intellect, and skills. Margot Sharpe is conscious of this, stating: "It isn't enough to be brilliant, if you are a woman. You must be demonstrably more brilliant than your male rivals—your 'brilliance' is your masculine attribute. And so, to balance this, you must be suitably feminine—which isn't to say emotionally unstable, volatile, 'soft' in any way, only just quiet, watchful, quick to absorb information, nonoppositional, self-effacing." Margot's strategy is effective in securing her advancement and professional stature at her university and within the scientific community. However, it also leaves her perilously vulnerable to being taken advantage of by her male colleagues, particularly her superior and mentor Milton Ferris—a "brilliant" specialist who goes on to win the Nobel Prize. Milton takes Margot as a lover and presents her

extensive research as his own. Shockingly, Margot continues to vehemently support Milton even after other scientists launch a campaign to discredit him and expose how he abused his power. It's fascinating how Margot's methods of altering her behaviour based on gender roles brings her success, but compromises her integrity. There is a sense that over a long period of time this subservience within the male-dominated workplace makes her internalize a disparity between the sexes: "she has always instructed herself *To be female is to be weak, and to squander time. To be female is a second choice.*" When Margot later achieves a level of high esteem she's lauded as both a feminist and anti-feminist. Oates meaningfully shows the deleterious effects when a highly intelligent and capable woman prioritizes her professional achievements over upholding the ideals of human equality.

One of Oates's great skills as a writer is to firmly place readers within the consciousness of her characters so we are able to fully imagine the world from their perspective. Italicised lines mark running subliminal thoughts. Descriptions of the landscape reflect the emotional temperament of the character viewing it. It's particularly striking when Oates finds an appropriate style of writing to simulate the logic of a consciousness so foreign to the majority of people's standard way of thinking and reasoning. This is exemplified in novels such as *Zombie* (1995) told from the perspective of a mass murderer who thinks in images and symbols or the later parts of *Blonde* (2000) when the narrative becomes fragmented and disjointed in accordance with Norma Jeane's increasing distress. There are sections of *The Man Without a Shadow* in which the narrative enters fully into Elihu's perspective and his system of coping with unfamiliar reality. He frequently hides his confusion and frustration by simulating understanding for the sake of social convention. When entering the research center he attempts to associate where he's supposed to go with the color of floor numbers. He frequently experiences a déjà-vu effect of intuitively knowing where to go, but not knowing why he knows or where he's going. By drawing readers so adeptly into Elihu's thought process, Oates creates a sympathetic understanding for his position and why he acts the way he does. This makes the concluding sections of the novel all the more poignant.

The Man Without a Shadow is a triumphantly successful novel that makes original connections between science's mission to comprehend the elusive mechanics of the mind and the humanities' exploration of the manifestations of love.